

My Uchideshi Experience Christine Dyer



I currently have the honour of being the oldest Kobayashi Dojo uchideshi, having been accepted for a month of live-in training at the age of 60. Why do something that sounds insane? Well, I've spent half my life doing aikido, and I felt that I could do more. I retired from work four years ago, and perhaps I also wanted to wake myself up from a life that had become too comfortable. I also simply wondered whether I could do it. When fellow Utah aikidoka Jeremy Neff said he was going, I decided to join him.

I knew that the training involved 19 hours of aikido class per week, plus extra visits to other dojos. At home I do 5 hours of aikido per week and I'm the instructor, so I haven't exactly been training hard. I was concerned about whether I'd be able to keep up. To prepare I did a lot of walking in the mountains near my home, while listening to Japanese lessons.

The first few days in Japan with jet lag were hard, and I was in survival mode. Lots of aikido, little free time or sleep, learning how the chores should be done, finding my way around, and the aikido style was also different for me. Week two was still very tiring but I was enjoying the training more. By week three I was not so tired, more comfortable with the techniques, and having fun with my new training partners. Week four was feeling good, and then I caught a cold. I had to miss two days of classes, and instead of being happy that I could finally rest I felt impatient that I couldn't train.

Dojo members were friendly and pleasant to work out with and I was able to train at an agreeable pace. The Kobayashi Dojo techniques and weapons provided new perspectives on the aikido I'm used to. Soshihan was in Finland for part of my stay, so I attended a lot of classes taught by Hiroaki Sensei and other instructors and senior students. I appreciated the times when Hiroaki Sensei would work out with me in class and I could experience his techniques.

Soshihan's classes were definitely something special. His enormous enjoyment of aikido and life in general actually made the dojo feel different. There was always laughter in his classes - his and everyone else's. Even in the first few days when I was very tired, I was always surprised by how quickly the time went by when he taught. On my last day I told him that I feel like an 18-year-old inside. He said he felt about 15. I believe him!

Keeping the dojos clean and learning to make everything run





smoothly is of the utmost importance. Therefore uchideshi life involves a lot of chores, especially when the glorious 40-year-old flowering cherry tree outside the Kodaira dojo is constantly snowing petals that must be swept up every day. The dojo newsletter was also published during my visit. This required a massive folding and mailing operation. And there was always

daily dojo cleaning. A minimum of two hours of chores per day and sometimes a lot more. I expected this, and once I'd accepted that cleaning up after the tree is an endless job I appreciated the quiet time of early morning sweeping. I also admired the grace with which the Japanese students naturally get chores done efficiently and unobtrusively.

Classes are split between the Tokorozawa and Kodaira dojos and I was grateful to be allowed to stay in the room at Kodaira and use a dojo bicycle for my daily trips to the railway station. Kodaira is Soshihan's dojo, and his wife Okusama kindly brought me an occasional meal and invited me upstairs to her home for a Sunday breakfast while Soshihan was away. At Tokorozawa, Hiroaki Sensei invited the uchideshi to his home for a breakfast cooked by his wife Miyoko San every Wednesday. We felt very welcome, and we ate well.

In addition to training we had some Japanese cultural experiences. At the Tuesday Japanese classes we met Morita Sensei, a sado (tea ceremony) master. She invited Jeremy and me to join her group for a tea ceremony. We spent the day having tea with several master-level sado practitioners. Sado was beautiful, but for me it would be more demanding than aikido training. Barbara Sensei invited me to teach her class one night, where we met Honma Toyotaka, a very precise aikido kyu ranked student who is a shakuhachi master. He was playing at a concert the following weekend and Barbara Sensei gave us free tickets. We were also able to try shodo, see famous sumo wrestlers at a festival, attend a hanami party, and participate in a dojo visit to the Aiki Shrine Festival on the last day of our trip. During the return drive, Soshihan shared some memories of his uchideshi years with Osensei.

The busy uchideshi life, late night/early morning schedule, and all the new duties were absolutely exhausting at first. I always felt willing, but overcoming physical and mental fatigue was my greatest challenge. I dozed on the train and on a couple of occasions I found myself walking down the street with my eyes closed. Being so tired, I made a lot of mistakes in my uchideshi duties. If there was a wrong way to do things, a wrong rag or



brush to use, a wrong order to do things in, I'd be guaranteed to find it. Recep, the Turkish resident uchideshi, was in charge of our work. His patience, unfailing good humour, and excellent example made all the difference for me. A great leader is one who encourages you and inspires you to try harder, and as far as I'm concerned Recep has that quality.

My one regret from this trip, apart from catching a cold, is that I was hoping to improve my suwariwaza with daily practice. But my knees, which have never given me problems before, refused to cooperate after the first few days. I wish I had known in advance that a lot of people wear knee pads in class.

At the beginning of the trip a month felt like a long time. At the end, it feels as though it went by very quickly. I'm leaving just as I'm getting comfortable, but I have to go home. I'll miss the people here, the training, and Soshihan's enthusiasm. My uchideshi certificate means as much to me as any dan certificate, possibly more. A big thank you to all for a very positive experience and teaching me the meaning of "Gambatte kudasai!"

